DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 093 006 CS 500 739

AUTHOR Fletcher, Winona L.
TITLE Unbandaged Eyes, Unmanacled Hands: Reflections of Revolt through the Pen of the Black Playwright.
PUB DATE Apr 74
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southern Speech Communication Association (Richmond, Virginia, April, 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS Authors; *Drama; *Negroes; Negro History; Playwriting; *Revolution; United States History
IDENTIFIERS *Black Playwrights

ABSTRACT

An analysis of the works of black playwrights since 1821 (the date of the earliest recorded play) reflects the Afro-American's concern with social revolution and his commitment to revolt. Early forms of protest in black drama revealed the desire to become active members of American society. Following a void in black playwrighting during the reconstruction period of the late nineteenth century, black intellectual rebellion was expressed in the 1930s, experienced a hiatus during the 1940s, and revived seriously in the late 1950s with Lorraine Hansberry's "Raisin in the Sun." Black drama during the 1960s exploded with plays of social protest aimed at the many characteristics of a sick society, then gave way by the end of the decade to concern with blacks themselves--self-determinism. Black revolutionary theater has progressed from disruption by white rowdies to the possibility that revolution in black theater may soon be out-dated. (JM)

ED 093006

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

UNBANDAGED EYES, UNMANACLED HANDS: REFLECTIONS OF REVOLT THROUGH THE PEN OF THE BLACK PLAYWRIGHT

Winona L. Fletcher

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Winona L. Fletcher

TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER.

CS 500 739

"When you removed the gag that was keeping these black mouths shut, what were you hoping for? That they would sing your praises? Did you think when they raised themselves up again, you would read adoration in the eyes of these heads that our fathers had forced to bend down to the very ground? . . ."

Jean Paul Sartre - BLACK ORPHEUS

In the course of all the reading which it takes to maketh Bacon's "full man" many ideas which we confront barely touch us, but a few have such an impact on our minds that they stay forever to haunt us. The opening quotation from Jean Paul Sartre's Black Orpheus belongs, for me, in this latter category, for it has haunted me for a number of years and the conditions of my birth bar me from even qualifying as the "addressee" of Sartre's message.

I suppose it has plagued me for two main reasons: (1) because of the explosive truth so inherent in its expression and (2) because its re-discovery in the 1960's and the subsequent widespread attention granted it gave some people the false notion that the black man had accepted his "place" in America and never lifted his voice in protest against his condition until the last decade.

Contrary to popular belief, the Afro-American has neither been content with his status in society nor has he just begun to voice his protest. In the theatre, which claims to be a reflection of society, from the beginning, black playwrights

have projected revolutionary ideas and actions through their dramas.

Facts to support this position scream out of the mouths of characters which black playwrights have been creating since 1821, the date of the earliest extant record. Listen to the evidence:

"I've said 'master' for the last time. What is death compared to slavery?"

Glen - ESCAPE - Brown

"Some of us always carried on out fight and kept alive the seeds of revolt."

Young Man - DON'T YOU WANT TO BE FREE-Hughes

" I intend to fight my way out of it' I AM A BLACK MAN! I'm going to stay black if it kills me!

Son - FAMILY POTRAIT-Caldwell

" This here's a white man's war
What the hell I got to be fighting for?"

EL HAJJ MALIK - Davidson

" Liberty! Liberty! . . .hurrah for the people."

Briquet - BLACK DOCTOR - Aldridge

" If Bessie Smith had killed some white people she wouldn't have needed that music."

Clay - DUTCHMAN - Jones

"I was crying out against 300 years of oppression; not against individuals."

Walker - THE SLAVE - Jones

"Do you think we will gain equality here? Not one Black man will be equal as long as the whites keep us in fragments --at least in Africa we have a future together."

Marcus - THE RISE - Fuller,Charles

"You middle-class black bastard. Forget your social-working mother . . ."

Lula - DUTCHMAN - Jones

"We are absolute revolutionaries . . . and our commitment is based upon death."

WE RIGHTEOUS BOMBERS -Bass

If you recognized cries for freedom, liberty, equality, remember that all effective revolutions have been for equality, justice and dignity.

If your first impulse is to dismiss the words as just some more writers using the stage for race propaganda, remember that all blacks are committed by birth to express the anger, frustration, and violence of a life lived in a basically hostile society. The drama which develops from the black experience must of necessity concern itself at one time or another with the stresses and implications of the racial situation.

If you find the militant language ominous, alarming, repulsive (and all the other adjectives thrust at the current revolutionists) remember that much of this reaction is expected--perhaps even provoked - since rejection of "white standards" is the base upon which many black revolutionaries say they must rebuild the black man's damaged psyche and move toward self-determinism. As Walker says in THE SLAVE: "The point is that you had your chance, darling, now these other folks have theirs."

Perchance you may fall again into the trap of believing that all these quotations came from the plays of the 1960's; I must, therefore, chart chronologically, a course for you to follow of the development of black revolutionary drama, pausing here and there to point out its historical significance and to mention how it reflects the black man's history, his position in society, and his (and others) changing attitudes. If the plays selected sound unfamiliar to you, write that off to one of society's "sins of omission." If you consider this a "bonus" to hear about them now, chalk that up to changing attitudes and to forward-thinking leaders of SSCA. And now to history.

Nothing remains to be examined from the first recorded script written and performed by Afro-Americans except scattered records in diaries and notations collected from playbills etc. This was a script entitled KING SHOTAWAY, written by a Mr. Brown and performed by the players of the African Grove Theatre in 1821. That such a theatre existed in New York for a brief period is a revolutionary act in itself, but of primary interest to this discussion is a surviving description of KING SHOTAWAY as "a drama based on the insurrection of the Caravs on the Island of St. Vincent." Our key word, of course, is "insurrection"--suggesting that the black man from the beginning sought to express rebellion on the stage and though it was another kind of

rebellion (disordiliness by a bunch of white rowdies) which closed the African Grove shortly thereafter, at least a statement for reform had been made.

Black playwrights who tried to express revolution for the next 30 odd years found it wiser to leave the country to write--and so they did until the chorus of rebellion in America had grown bold and loud enough to permit black voices to join it again. The decade was the 1850's; this time the revolt was against slavery, an institution which single-handedly committed more blacks to revolt than any other institution in history. From this period, one script survives--ESCAPE, or A LEAP FOR FREEDOM, a piece contemporary with UNCLE TOM'S CABIN. William Wells Brown, a black man who experienced first hand the humiliations of slavery, recorded in ESCAPE his own revolt against the corruptions it imposed on the slaves and society as a whole. When the hero leaps from the window of his captor's shack, revolt is physicalized and Brown makes it perfectly clear that Glen's leap is a leap for freedom. He becomes a liberated human being for the first time in his life and nothing can make him another man's property again. Like Liza crossing the ice, there was no turning back.

Brown's drama was never performed, but he read it to much applause at abolitionists gatherings. Unfortunately, after the Civil War it was neglected--oddly enough Uncle Tom's Cabin was not. The black playwright's voice of revolt was

again silenced--or more accurately coerced into song by the hey-dey of black-face minstrelsy which was sweeping the nation during the time. Minstrelsy needed no playwrights and it would scarcely have attracted black writers of protest into its fold even if the need had existed. The voices of protest against minstrelsy came--later--but not in the form of dramatic literature.

The era of reconstruction begged for black playwrights who could articulate the freedman's hope and aspirations--hopes which turned into disillusionment and despair and finally into bitterness and fear. If such a playwright came forth records of him have been lost from the annals of history. But a playwright did step forward in the 20th century who, sensing the void that had existed in the late 19th century, wrote a play of protest inspired by the early freedman's struggle. The playwright was Theodore Ward; the play, OUR LAN'; the setting, Savannah, Ga.; the time, 1865. The plot related the simple story of the Negroes who were given land in Georgia after the Civil War and the subsequent decision by the government to take it from them, of their revolt against this action leading to their final defeat. The play was produced off-Broadway in 1947 and received attention from leading American critics--including Brooks Atkinson and George Jean Nathan. The drama deserved the praise it received for it is "compelling" and "honest" etc. as the critics acclaimed it, but in their efforts to grant a black playwright the ability to "transcend race," the critics somehow over-

looked the fact that the play is bristling with social rebellion and protest. From the very first plaintive refrain . . . "Oh, Lawd save me . . ." heard in the semi-darkness of the opening curtain, to Joshuah's final pronouncement to Burkhardt who comes to put him off the land "neither yuh nor all de rest of de planters put together goin ever kill de things we's after", there is group resistance to the surrounding social forces.

Historically, the Reconstruction period--an era of light and hope, digressed into one of the really dark ages in race relations in America. Black men hung from tall, lonely pines in the South and were slaughtered in the race riots which took place in the streets of the cities. It was a painful era of open revolution which did not inspire dramaturgy of rebellion. Black men chose instead to keep the theatrical doors open to them by sticking their best dancing toe into the crack which the musical theatre forced open.

With the arrival of the 1920's and the so-called "New Negro," the forerunner of the revolutionists of the 60's, the black intellectual with his pen dipped in rebellion, came to the forefront. Most prolific and defiant of these was Langston Hughes whose intense concern for social problems of the Negro in the South led him to write MULATTO in the early 1930's. Perhaps, this era, dominated by sociopolitical plays, gave Hughes the stimulus he needed to tackle

the very explosive problem of racial intermixture. At any rate MULATTO, as the title suggests, deals with the plight of a rebellious son born of a white plantation owner and his Negro housekeeper. As in Bouccicault's OCTOROON, the Negro blood stands in the way of the protagonist's aspirations and achievements (society has decreed this so from the beginning). The only way out for a stubborn, proud, arrogant mulatto, who ironically inherited all of these traits from his white father, is to rebel--a rebellion which leads to his downfall and death. The germ idea of inner conflict and rebellion which inspired the drama is expressed in Hughes' poem "Cross." The poem also suggests the dilemma and inner conflicts frequently experienced by many blacks.

My old man's a white old man

material deleted due to

copyright restrictions

Being neither white nor black.

Hatch and Shine in their new anthology of black drama (Black Theatre U.S.A.) bemoan the fact that "the socially relevant theatre of the 1930's went, like Lucky Strike green, off to war" in the 40's, leaving the theatre and the nation to flounder in continued discrimination, racial intolerance, and warnings from the government that internal rebellion would

only defeat our efforts to bring peace to a troubled world. But black leaders in society and in the theatre began to see through this screen and mobilized. The stage was set and waiting for the appearance of the tru rebellious NATIVE SON. Richard Wright's novel of that name, later dramatized by Wright and Paul Green, exploded on the scene and became a classic in black American literature.

NATIVE SON is social protest of the 40's personified. It is pre-integration in concept and in this sense must remain in the 40's, but the injustices which made Bigger Thomas the suffering, rebellious out-cast that he is are so contemporary that one can walk outside and encounter numerous Biggers on the street. If the story of NATIVE SON is not so familiar to you that it needs no recounting here, then I can only urge you to make it so--and warn that delay may be more tragic than you know. Bigger is a key to understanding much of the rebellion that society is experiencing from the black man in the theatre and in the streets today.

The decades of the 50's and 60's have been characterized in many ways--they are still so fresh a memory for most of us that we need little assistance in recalling the startling events which set them apart. Beginning with hopes at seeing the institution of segregation crumble with the passage of new civil rights acts (the first since 1857), passing through the stages of frustration and ambivalence, and finally erupting

into open antagonism and rejection, the socially committed black writer stripped away the veils of disillusionments and gave birth to a theatre which was openly proclaimed "Black Revolutionary Theatre."

In the late 50's Lorraine Hansberry's name entered the conversation of every serious theatre-goer. Somehow in her RAISIN IN THE SUN she had made protest palatable--or in Strindberg's words had "let the middle class audience grasp the gist of the matter without troubling their brains too much." While whites in general hailed it as the arrival of "great black drama," blacks were divided in their attitudes toward it. In the furor that resulted much of its revolutionary nature was lost or glossed over. But it is revolutionary, be assured of that. Mama (if no one else) recognizes the explosive potential of her new generation children very early in the drama with "they frightens me, Ruth--my children." There are statements of protest against old spirituality, segregated neighborhoods, economic conditions, woman's place, castration of black manhood, suppression of black identity and many more. So many themes, in fact, that the playwrights of the 60's needed to go no further than it for protest ideas to blow up into the scores of revolutionary plays which hit society in the 60's.

And then came the alienated, angry young playwrights led by Leroi Jones, who proclaimed a desire to be as bitter as his great, great, great, great, grandfather was when he was taken off the slave boat. These writers were dedicated to

exposing evils which America has forced upon their race. Their first act was to cast aside aspirations for integrating into the mainstream of American cultural life. The mainstream was found to be polluted--the American dream only a myth. Revolutionary theatre devised alternate routes--routes which led through black power, black consciousness, black determinism. Negro rebellion became total black revolution--in concept, in form, in style, and in audience sought.

Clay in Jones' DUTCHMAN (who is the middle-class Bigger, who in turn is the Reconstruction Joshuah embittered by years of unkept promises) is finally forced by the persistent white antagonist to drop his "innocence" and boldly face the real world; he talks wildly of murder but he does not act. When the murder comes it is through the knife-wielding hand of the white woman. But there is a premonitory message in his talk picked up later by playwright Charles Fuller: "I think there may come a day when we will have to burn down his cities, to show him our oneness of aim." Unity has become one of the black revolutionary's major themes. It is perhaps time now to go on with Sartre's quotation:

> Here are black men standing, looking at us, and I hope that you--like me--will feel the shock of being seen.

Negro rebellion became total black revolution in the eyes of Baraka and the young playwrights whom he inspired: Ed Bullins, Ben Caldwell, Ron Miller, Richard Wesley. Even those who revolted through humor and satire (Ted Shine,

Douglas Turner Ward, Ossie Davis) thrust a sharper rapier at existing conditions than society had been acustomed to feeling from the black man. White critics have frequently criticized these revolutionaries for advocating violence through their "fantasies of revenge;" the playwrights have responded that "violence is as American as apple pie" and gone right on writing. As the 1970's are being ushered in there seems to be less concern with correcting the evils of society than with having the black man take a look at himself. Does this suggest an end to social revolution in the black theatre? It is, perhaps, too soon to draw this conclusion, but there are others which can be drawn.

1. The black man by the nature of his birth and position in America has been forced into a commitment to revolt; in most instances, his drama reflects his concern with social revolution.

2. The black playwright's early forms of protest clearly indicated a desire to "get in"--were, indeed appeals to America to let the black man be a part of the so-called democratic society. Then in the words of Toni Cade:

3. "Revolution was talked to death on the stages of the 30's. The residue hung in the air till the 60's. But at least revolutionary upheaval is taking place in a realer sense in our time . . ."

4. By the end of the 60's there was an obvious shift in the revolutionary commitment of most black playwrights. Social protest aimed at a sick society gave way to concern with black determinism. Perhaps this in itself is a form of rebellion--like silence after one has grown weary of persuasive rhetoric falling on deaf ears.

All in all, black revolutionary theatre has come a long way since the white rowdies seated behind the partition in the African Grove Theatre disrupted the performance and

sent the actors off to jail. In June of last year (1973) during the D.C. Black Repertory Company's production of THE BLACKS at the Kennedy Center, the entry doors were chained during the revolution scene. Apparently no one panicked and the actors were not hauled away to jail. More encouraging than this, however, was the designation of time given in this production as "THEN, NOW, AND HOPEFULLY, NOT TOMORROW!!. Perhaps revolution in black theatre may be soon out-dated!

Winona L. Fletcher

Kentucky State University
Frankfort, Ky. 40601

SSCA - Richmond, Va.
April 10, 1974